

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Nancy Schmidt of Waukesha, Wisconsin (b. 1951, Port Washington) has been rosemaling since 1977 when she took a class in Hallingdahl style at the urging of her mother. Thirteen years later, she was recognized for her excellence in the art with a gold medal in rosemaling from Vesterheim Norwegian American Museum in Decorah, Iowa.

Rosemaling is a form of decorative painting that was popular in Norway in the 18th century and had resurgence in the late 20th century. Wisconsin was a center of the rosemaling revival, thanks to Per Lysne of Stoughton. It features painted scrolls inspired by the acanthus vine with added stylized flowers. There are many styles of rosemaling, each linked to a particular region of Norway. Nancy is skilled in several, especially Telemark, Rogaland, Os, Valdres, Hallingdal, and Gudbrandsdal.

Nancy is strongly tied to the community of rosemalers in southern Wisconsin. She is a member and past president of the Norse Rosemalers' Association in Milwaukee and a member of the Wisconsin State Rosemaling Association based in Stoughton. Along with instruction in skills, Nancy also mentored her apprentices in entering that larger rosemaling community.

Nancy took her first apprentice, Jeneva Lehmkuhl, to study historic examples of rosemaling at Vesterheim in Decorah, Iowa and Little Norway in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin. "We could see how painting varied within a style depending on the artist yet all with the same basic characteristics." They also used the visits to delve deeper in the history and culture of Norway, an important contextual part of the art.

Jeneva's study focused on strengthening design and painting in the Telemark style, which meant learning how to work with different colors and shading. She completed four pieces and entered them in two shows – her first time doing so. "Without this program, I would never have had the personal guidance and courage to enter pieces into the rosemaling shows." Jeneva earned awards on them, along with the judges' valuable critiques.

Nancy's second apprentice, Andrea Herkert, a more advanced painter, also entered pieces in two shows, winning Best in Show in both. Andrea's apprenticeship had focused on developing the positive elements of her free style of painting and strengthening the flow of her Telemark style. "It was an incredible experience and has changed my painting and my approach to it...I will in turn encourage and inspire others." The judges agreed and cited her creativity.

"(This apprenticeship) helped me to reaffirm my knowledge about rosemaling and the history of it...It makes me appreciate the beauty of it." Nancy Schmidt